

Message Text

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R 222258Z MAY 75
FM SECSTATE WASHDC
TO AMEMBASSY DAMASCUS
INFO AMEMBASSY KUWAIT

S E C R E T STATE 119472

FOLLOWING REPEAT STATE 119472 ACTION USDEL SECRETARY 22 MAY 75

QUOTE

S E C R E T STATE 119472 TOSEC 010189

NO FOREIGN DISSEM

E.O. 11652: GDS
TAGS: PFOR/MOPS/IR/SY/PBOR

SUBJECT: INR ASSESSMENT OF IRAQI-SYRIAN DISPUTE

1. FOLLOWING ANALYSIS PREPARED BY INR
2. THE 12-YEAR-OLD DISPUTE BETWEEN THE RIVAL BAATHIST REGIMES IN DAMASCUS AND BAGHDAD HAS HEATED UP MARKEDLY IN RECENT WEEKS:

--(A) DAMASCUS HAS CUT THE EUPHRATES FLOW TO IRAQ, IN PART IN RETALIATION FOR IRAQI-INSPIRED SUBVERSION. THE EFFECT ON FARMING IN LOWER IRAQ HAS BEEN SERIOUS.

--(B) SYRIA FEARS IRAQI MILITARY ACTION. BOTH SIDES ARE
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TAKING MILITARY PRECAUTIONS, SHIFTING TROOPS TOWARD THE BORDER, AND BEEFING UP DEFENSES. THE PACE OF THESE MOVES HAS SPEEDED OVER THE PAST WEEK.

--(C) EARLIER MEDIATION EFFORTS BY SAUDI ARABIA AND SADAT'S RECENT ROUND OF TALKS HAVE HAD NO DISCERNIBLE EFFECT IN DAMPENING TENSIONS, AND THE RISK OF CLASHES IS GROWING.

3. DIRECT MILITARY ACTION BY THE IRAQI ARMY OF 135,000

AGAINST THE BETTER-EQUIPPED SYRIAN ARMY OF 200,000 WOULD BE RECKLESS GAMBLE, AND INVASION OF SYRIA WOULD OFFEND THE POWERFUL MYSTIQUE OF ARAB BROTHERHOOD, LET ALONE INCUR CONDEMNATION AS HELPING ISRAEL. EVEN A LIMITED IRAQI STRIKE AGAINST THE TABQAH DAM WOULD RISK UNITING THE SYRIAN PEOPLE BEHIND ASAD AND ANTAGONIZING THE USSR, WHICH BUILT THE DAM AND STILL HAS PERSONNEL IN THE AREA.

4. THEREFORE, WHILE THE PRESENT MILITARY PREPARATIONS INCREASE THE LIKELIHOOD OF BORDER CLASHES, WE DO NOT ANTICIPATE AN IRAQI ATTACK ON SYRIA, UNLESS IT WERE TO COME IN THE CONTEXT OF A COUP AGAINST ASAD SUPPORTED BY SIGNIFICANT ELEMENTS OF THE SYRIAN BAAATH PARTY AND THE ARMY. RATHER, IT WOULD BE IN THE ARAB TRADITION FOR THE PARTIES EVENTUALLY TO GIVE HEED TO OUTSIDE ARAB EFFORTS TO FACILITATE A COMPROMISE. BEFORE THE MILITARY SITUATION REACHED A FLASH POINT, ARAB MEDIATION MIGHT LEAD SYRIA TO RELEASE SOMEWHAT MORE WATER AND BAGHDAD TO MODERATE SOMEWHAT ITS RHETORIC AGAINST ASAD. STILL, THE POSSIBILITY OF SOME FORM OF LIMITED MILITARY ACTION CANNOT BE RULED OUT ENTIRELY.

5. NEVERTHELESS, SADDAM HUSAYN, WHO HAS EMERGED AS THE EFFECTIVE RULER IN IRAQ, APPEARS TO BE SEEKING TO CAP HIS SUCCESS AGAINST THE KURDS BY TOPPLING THE ASAD REGIME IN DAMASCUS BY POLITICAL MEANS. HAVING FURTHER STRENGTHENED HIS POSITION BY REACHING AN ACCORD WITH IRAN AND BY SETTLING LONG-STANDING BORDER PROBLEMS WITH SAUDI ARABIA, SADDAM IS FREER THAN EVER IN THE PAST TO CONCENTRATE ON SYRIA.

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6. IN A POWER STRUGGLE WITH ASAD, SADDAM HAS SOME ADVANTAGES:

--(A) AS A SUNNI, HE IS A MEMBER OF THE SECT WHICH PREDOMINATES IN SYRIA AND DOMINATES IRAQ.

--(B) HIS DOMINANCE IN IRAQ APPEARS MORE ASSURED THAN DOES ASAD'S IN SYRIA.

--(C) SADDAM COMMANDS COPIOUS OIL REVENUES IN COMPARISON WITH SYRIA'S RESOURCES.

7. ASAD CONTROLS POLICY THROUGH THE SYRIAN BAAATH PARTY'S

REGIONAL COMMAND -- REPORTEDLY SUBJECT TO THE ULTIMATE SANCTION OF THE ELDERS OF THE ALAWITE COMMUNITY. HE MAINTAINS POWER THROUGH THE ARMED FORCES, WHOSE LOYALTY HE MAKES METICULOUS EFFORTS TO ENSURE. THE TWO ELITE

FORCES IN THE DAMASCUS AREA ARE COMMANDED BY HIS BROTHER RIF'AT (WHO HAS MADE HIS OWN FORCE SOMETHING OF AN INDEPENDENT BASE OF POWER) AND HIS NEPHEW 'ADNAN AL ASAD (REPUTED TO BE A COUNTERWEIGHT TO RIF'AT).

8. BUT ASAD'S EFFORT TO CONSOLIDATE THE RULE OF AN ALAWITE SECTARIAN AUTOCRACY IN A COUNTRY WHOSE POPULATION IS 70 PERCENT SUNNI MOSLEM HAS PRODUCED LATENT SUNNI OPPOSITION. FOR COSMETIC PURPOSES, ASAD HAS SURROUNDED HIMSELF WITH A FEW TAME SUNNIS IN ADDITION TO THE PREPONDERANCE OF ALAWITES IN TOP BAATH PARTY AND MILITARY POSTS. THIS FORMAT HAS NOT SATISFIED THE SUNNI OFFICERS, SOME OF WHOM LAST SUMMER RESISTED ASAD'S PARTICIPATION IN THE US-SPONSORED STEP-BY-STEP DIPLOMACY EFFORT. EVEN IF ASAD HIMSELF HAS THE FLAIR AND SENSE TO COMMAND A FAIR AMOUNT OF GENERAL POPULARITY, HIS VENAL BROTHER RIF'AT REMAINS A FOCUS OF SUNNI ANTIPATHY.

9. ASAD'S WEAKNESSES COULD TEMPT SADDAM TO PRESS HIS ADVANTAGE TO FURTHER THE AMBITIONS OF THE IRAQI BAATH. A PRO-IRAQI CONSPIRACY IN SYRIA WAS REPORTEDLY BROKEN UP IN OCTOBER 1974. ANOTHER CLUTCH OF SUSPECTED IRAQI AGENTS WAS ARRESTED JUST BEFORE THE REGIONAL COMMAND ELECTIONS IN
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APRIL. NEVERTHELESS, THE SYRIAN BAATH STRUCTURE STILL CONTAINS POTENTIAL MALCONTENTS.

10. IT WOULD BE DIFFICULT TO PLOT ANY DIRECT CONNECTION BETWEEN THE PRESENT IRAQI-SYRIAN CONFRONTATION AND THE SYRIAN ATTITUDE TOWARD GOING TO GENEVA OR ANOTHER EGYPT-ISRAELI AGREEMENT. ALTHOUGH THE FEAR OF HOSTILITIES ON TWO FRONTS MIGHT ARGUABLY MAKE ASAD MORE CONCILIATORY TOWARD ISRAEL, RENEWED TENSION BETWEEN ISRAEL AND SYRIA WOULD BE THE ONE FACTOR THAT WOULD MAKE IRAQI MILITARY ACTION AGAINST SYRIA IMPLAUSIBLE. INGERSOLL

UNQUOTE. INGERSOLL

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